Jennifer Stock: My name is Jennifer Stock and I'm the host for Ocean Currents. This show comes to you once a month on KWMR and we talk about all topics about the ocean. Sometimes ocean exploration, natural history, sometimes focusing on our national marine sanctuaries right here off the coast of Point Reyes outside the Golden Gate in San Francisco and today we're actually going to be going into a little bit of history, talking about the Farallon Islands and some of the human history of those beautiful islands that are just offshore. Most of the time we just get little glimpses of them as the fog lifts and they're very magical and mystical and host to so many types of animals, but there are actually quite a few humans that have lived there in the past.

So, it'll be really interesting to hear about that. We'll be talking with Peter White. This is a pre-recorded interview. I was able to talk with Peter a few weeks ago and he is the author of the Farallon Islands: Sentinels of the Golden Gate and it's a great book highlighting the human history of the Farallon Islands. So, stay with us to catch this show. You're listening to KWMR, 90.5 FM in Point Reyes Station, 89.7 in Bolinas.

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Jennifer Stock: Just 26 miles west of San Francisco, the Farallon Islands are a resting refuge to several species of seabirds, marine mammals, migratory songbirds, inter-tidal invertebrates and algae. What most folks don't know is that the islands have a tremendous human history as well. Despite its remote location, harsh living conditions, it has been occupied by humans for over 100 years and has endured a harsh and lively history. Today, I'm talking with Peter White. He is the author of The Farallon Islands: Sentinels of the Golden Gate, published in 1995. Peter researched the human occupation and history on the islands, which is quite varied and diverse. So, welcome, Peter, and thank you for joining me on Ocean Currents.

Peter White: Well, thank you for having me, Jennifer.

Jennifer Stock: Can you tell me how you first got interested in the Farallon Islands and what moved you to write this book?

Peter White: Well, I…my hobby and my interest is natural history and wildlife and so, this led me to volunteer to work on the island and I worked as an assistant to the biologist there and while I was there I noticed

old structures, old foundations, and became curious about them and so, I started a research project to find out as much as I could about the people that had gone before and this project lasted ten or fifteen years or so. It was sort of done in fits and starts and what I…when I was through, I wrote the book and this is a summary of what I had learned.

Jennifer Stock: Where did you find a lot of your resources for your research?

Peter White: A lot of the resources were in the National Archives in Washington, DC, also in Bagcroft Library and the Federal Records Center in San Bruno. These weren't the only places, but these were the places that were most fruitful.

Jennifer Stock: How about we start with just a general description of the islands. Where are they, the size of them, some of the terrain, what it's like. Can you give us a little description?

Peter White: There are two groups of Farallones, the southern group and the north Farallon Islands and between these two groups is one small island known as Middle Farallon and the Southern Farallones consist of two islands, Southeast Farallon Islands and Main Top Island and these two islands of the Southern Farallones are separated by very a narrow surge channel called the Jordan and altogether, the southern Farallones consist of 120 acres of very rugged terrain and eight miles to the north are the North Islands and the North Islands are really four great rocks that come up on the ocean to heights of 78 to 112 feet. The Farallones are granite. They're really, the tops of an underwater ridgeline that runs parallel to the coast and the south Farallones are 27 miles from the Golden Gate as measured from Point Bonita. Another way of looking at it is they're 30 and one half miles from the Golden Gate Bridge and the North Islands are 18 miles southwest of Point Reyes.

Jennifer Stock: Some of the features on the island are named after its historical occupants such as Murre Bridge, which is a large arch that's quite prominent named after the common murre. Are there other features named as such after the occupants?

Peter White: Well, the names of the features of the island were given by two groups. First group would be the lighthouse keepers and the second group, the biologists. The light-keepers tended to name things based on what they looked like. For instance, Finger Rock or Indian Head. One of the providences on the east side of the island is Schubert Point and that was named after William Schubert, who was the chairman of the lighthouse board. When the biologists

came, they adapted some of the light-keepers names, but they tended to give names that related to their study subjects such as Moronga Bay, Moronga being the scientific name for elephant seal or Foca Alley, Foca being the scientific name for harbor seal or Mussel Slat.

Jennifer Stock: How did we learn about a lot of these early occupants? Do we know if Native Americans used the islands? In your book, actually, you talk about Island of the Dead, an aboriginal term for the spirit gathering in the west, but I wasn't really clear if the islands represented that to other Native Americans. What do we know about the time out there?

Peter White: Well, there's no indication that the local Indians ever lived on or visited the islands. Now, they did have boats, but these boats were made from bundles of reeds and they were suitable for quiet in-shore waters, but not suitable for traveling offshore. There were some interesting artifacts found in a 1949 archaeological dig on Southeast Farallon and they found projectile points associated with Eurok Indians and also Indians from Vancouver Islands in Canada. Now, these Indians from Vancouver Island had large, dug-out canoes and could make extended trips, extended voyages and so it's possible that they came down to the California coast. The Eurok Indians, however, are pretty much confined or were pretty much confined to their areas around the Klamath River. So, the question is, how did these artifacts get to the islands? And the most likely explanation is that they were embedded in the bodies of marine mammals by hunters and these mammals were wounded, escaped, and subsequently died on the Farallones. Now, as far as the Island of the Dead is concerned, there was an ethnologist, Steven Powers, who studied the California Indians in the late 19th century and he described the belief of the local Indians being that after they died, their body or souls would go across the waters to the islands.

So, the dead were….the dead Indians would…live or inhabit and writers took this idea that Steven Powers had and then associated the Farallones with this myth and whether this is correct or not is really uncertain.

Jennifer Stock: Interesting. Is this term and this idea of the Island of the Dead something that was also familiar down in the southern California area with the Channel Islands?

Peter White: I don't know.

Jennifer Stock: Yeah. It's something interesting. It'd be interesting to look about. Well, then we start to get a little bit more information and it seems that the next period were the English, Spaniards, and Russians, each taking a role in exploring the West Coast of California. How did each of these groups come to find and explore the Farallon Islands?

Peter White: Well, first the Spanish, of course, were the first Europeans to see the islands. So, probably the first explorer to see them was Cabrillo and Cabrillo sailed up as far as Point Reyes in 1542. However, he never mentioned the islands. The first mention of the islands was by Sebastian Surmenio in 1592 and Surmenio was a captain of a Manilla Galleon that was wrecked at Point Reyes and he took a small boat and his crew and returned to Mexico and he mentioned passing the Farallones. The first time the Farallones were put on a map was by a Spanish explorer, Sebastian Vizcaino, and Vizcaino was given the job of charting the waters along the California coast and in 1603, he made a map that showed the Farallones and the North Farallones and South Farallones.

Jennifer Stock: Now, did he…was he the one who named it The Island of St. James or did he name it the Farallones?

Peter White: Vizcaino named the islands Isla Hendido, that was, he named the southern islands Isla Hendido -- Hendido meaning cliffed or crannied. The north islands he called "Brothers Frayas." The name, Islands of St. James, was given by Sir Francis Drake and Sir Francis Drake visited the Farallones in 1579. He stopped there one day after he left the California coast and Sir Francis Drake's reason for visiting the islands was to take on seals to provision his ship and when Drake or one of his crew members stepped to shore. He was the first European to set foot in what is now the city of San Francisco because the islands are within the city limits.

Jennifer Stock: These folks were probably on huge, bulky ships. How did they get on, off these islands that are so rugged and there's no landing, really. It's pretty difficult to get on and off. Are there any thoughts or theories of how they got on and off the islands?

Peter White: Well, I…we don't know for sure, but it's probable that what they did is they anchored a little ways off the island and took a small boat into the shore and like you say, they had to scramble over rocks to get on to them.

Jennifer Stock: So, what was the next period of history like? They had a lot of Spanish exploration happening. There's also a period of the fur hunters coming out to the islands. How did the New Englanders know about the Farallon Islands?

Peter White: Captain Cook's last voyage was in 1776 or 1778 and he had an American crew member, a man by the name John Legerd, and what happened was that Cook's crew members found that the sea otter skins were highly prized by the Chinese and so, John Legerd, when he came back to New England, he told about getting fabulous prices for sea otter skins and so, this encouraged New Englanders to go around the horn to hunt for sea otters along the California coast and they would take the skins to China where they'd sell them at very high prices and in 1807 one of these otter-hunting ships, a ship called the Okaine, was going from Alaska to Baja, California and the captain of the Okaine decided to stop at the Farallones to see what was there and the captain reported a large number of fur and hair seals, but since the Okaine was primarily interested in otters, he left the next day, the captain left the next day.

However, three years later, that ship, Okaine, stopped, came back to the Farallones, this time accompanied by four other ships and this time these five ships put hunting parties on the islands to hunt fur seals. Now, the fur seals weren't nearly as valuable as the sea otters, but it was much easier to hunt the fur seal because you could herd a bunch of them together and kill many all at one time, whereas it took several skilled men to hunt one sea otter. So, in a 26 month period from 1810 to 1812 these five ships all from Boston killed more than 150,000 fur seals and sold the skins to China where they sold them for $2.50 a piece.

Jennifer Stock: Oh my gosh. Is there any records from your research about how abundant sea otters were around the Farallon Islands or even along this part of the California coast? I mean, this is probably the period that really wiped them out here, but I'm curious if there were some sort of records of how abundant they were here.

Peter White: Well, there's no primary source that really indicates that there were sea otters around the Farallones. Sea Otters were not hunted there. Some people believe that they were and this is based on, I think, number one, speculation and number two, some mistranslation of Russian documents. It is possible, however, that Aleut hunters, these were and this is based on, I think, number one, speculation and number two, some mistranslation of Russian documents. It is possible, however, that Aleut hunters, these were hunters that

hunted for the Russians during the Russian period, left from the Farallones and went into San Francisco Bay to hunt sea otters.

Jennifer Stock: Along the coast as well, probably.

Peter White: And along the coast.

Jennifer Stock: A lot of urchins and now, how did the New England hunters overlap with the Russians that came down and set up a settlement along the Sonoma Coast? How did they overlap and did they team up together or were they competitors?

Peter White: Well, they had a competitive relationship and a cooperative relationship. The New England ships that came to California, many of them would go up to Alaska and take on Aleut hunters because the Russians had the hunters and the New England men had the ships and so, they could combine to hunt the otter. By the time that the ships stopped at the Farallones to hunt fur seals, this cooperation was no longer in effect and the hunters on the Farallones were mostly Hawaiian Islanders.

These ships had picked up Hawaiian Islanders before they had gone to the islands. Now, the Russians occupied Fort Ross from 1812 to 1841 and during part of this period, probably 1817 to 1838, they maintained an outpost, a hunting outpost, on the Farallones and the outpost consisted of one or two Russian overseers and number of Aluet or Kodiak Indians. These are Indians that the Russians brought down with them from Alaska and the purpose of this outpost was primarily to kill sea lions then salt and cure the meat and send it back to Fort Ross as food and they also collected bird eggs and bird feathers which they would use.

Now, the Russians sometimes sent out native California Indians and the native California Indians that they sent out were most often kashaya pomo, which was the Indians around Fort Ross, but these Indians were sent out against their will. They were sent out to serve on the Farallones as hard labor as punishment for violating Russian rules. In 1826 it was reported that of the 18 men and women on the island six were native California Indians serving sentences.

Jennifer Stock: Wow and they probably were providing food for the other people on the islands as well, being strong hunter/gatherers as far as, like, the inner-tidal and gathering food.

Peter White: Well, it's interesting that there's so many different ethnic groups. There's the Aleuts, the Kodiaks, the native Californians, the Russians. So, it must have been an interesting interaction with all of these different cultural...

Jennifer Stock: Yeah, I wonder how they communicated. So, with these different periods of time, I'm assuming this is about...when we have all of these different people from the land in different countries all coming out to the islands, this possibly could have been a vector for bringing introduced species along to the Farallon Islands. Do we have a timeline of when introduced species started showing up there?

Peter White: Well, we really don't. The introduced mammals on the island were rabbits and mice and the rabbits were eradicated in 1976 and the mice are still there, but the US Fish and Wildlife service has plans to eradicate them.

Jennifer Stock: So, okay, we've got a lot of people hunting mammals out there and there was a pretty much...they pretty much wiped out the fur seals and the Russians started to retreat. What happened? Were the islands relatively free of human occupation at that time or do we know what happened once the fur seals were determined to be pretty much hunted out?

Peter White: Well, we don't know when the last Boston ship visited the islands to hunt for fur seal and the Russians probably left in 1838 and from then until the late 1840's there was probably nobody that really went to the Farallones, but in the 1850's the Gold Rush was on. There was a great influx of population into San Francisco and California and at the same time, there wasn't an agricultural industry to support these people. There weren't, for example, chicken farms. So, chicken eggs were generally not available, but out in the Farallones there was a bird that breeds there, it's the common murre, and the murre lays an egg about twice the size of a chicken egg and by all accounts, every bit as good.

So, individuals and groups would go out to the Farallones, gather murre eggs for sale in San Francisco, and in 1851, six men formed a stock company called the Pacific Egg Company and the purpose of the company was to gather murre eggs for sale on the mainland and every year at the beginning of the egg-laying season, which was in May, ten to twenty men would land on the islands. These men were known as egg pickers and they would stay gathering eggs until July when the egg-laying stopped and the company had buildings on the island.

They had a two-story wood-frame building with a kitchen and dining hall downstairs and a sleeping room upstairs. They, even though they only occupied the islands during the nesting season, they did have a caretaker who would stay on the island year-round. For many years this was a man by the name of Luftwood Smith and by all accounts he was sort of a hermit type of guy and when they...the way they would conduct their business is that the company had the islands sectioned off into particular discreet picking areas and when the men first went into a picking area, they'd smash every egg they could find. That way they could be assured that when they returned to the same area the next day that every egg they gathered would be fresh.

Jennifer Stock: Would it still work the same way if they had just removed an egg or they had...I mean, I'm surprised they had to smash them versus actually using the egg and knowing that the bird might reproduce.

Peter White: Well, they would smash the egg because they only wanted to gather fresh eggs. They didn't want any eggs that had embryos.

Jennifer Stock: So, they didn't know how old they were?

Peter White: They didn't know how old they were.

Jennifer Stock: So, this was just one company at the very beginning with the murre eggs and hunting for eggs?

Peter White: Yes. There was only one company and the company claimed exclusive rights to the island. However, not everybody agreed that they had exclusive rights and other groups would come out to the islands and they would try to dispossess the company and they'd do this by force of arms. So, there were battles on the island over the eggs and the principal battle occurred in 1863. On June 4th, there were three boats that came out to the islands. There were 27 men, they were heavily armed, they even had a cannon and the next day, they attempted to land and this resulted in a 20-minute gun battle because the egg company decided to defend themselves. There were two men shot and killed and a number were wounded.

Well, the egg company managed to drive off these invaders and maintain their position, but then they fell into conflict with the government and the government had established a lighthouse on the island and the lightkeepers claimed that the egg company and their activities were interfering with the operation of the lighthouse. Now, the egg company claimed for their part that the lightkeepers were stealing company property when they were

gathering eggs for their own use. The lightkeepers and their families were gathering eggs for their own use and so, this was resolved in 1881 when the government landed a group of soldiers on the island and evicted the egg company at gunpoint. This wasn't the end of commercial egg gathering, though, because now that the egg company was out of the way, the lightkeepers in cooperation with some fishermen went into the egg business and they gathered eggs commercially and sold them in San Francisco until 1896.

In 1896 the American Ornithological Union, the California Academy of Sciences, and the Audobon Society of the Pacific, which is now known as the Golden Gate Audobon society, they pressured the US lighthouse service to enforce their own rules against commercial egg-gathering and so, the lighthouse service agreed with them then complied to put an end to commercial egg gathering.

Jennifer Stock: Interesting. How about as far as when they were egg gathering, was there...it seems there's a lot of different bird life going on. Was there a disturbance to some of the other smaller birds like Auklets and puffins and other birds out there that are small nesters like that? Do you think there was much disturbance at that time?

Peter White: I do think there was a disturbance because these people that were out there had no sense of conservation. They just would trample over auklet burrows and so forth and it wasn't only the murre eggs that were gathered. They gathered the eggs of the Western Gull before they would take the murre eggs. I'll put it this way, the western gulls laid their eggs first, they'd gather those, eggs and sell those for food. Now, the western gull eggs were not as large as the murre egg and also they had a thinner shell so they were harder to handle, but these eggs were gathered and also the western gulls would compete for the murre eggs on the island.

So, they would...any western gull egg that was not gathered, they would try to smash to reduce the gull population. They also wouldn't gather...this is the lightkeepers, would gather the eggs of the ashy storm petril and leechy storm petril, and these were prized by egg collectors oologists and so, there was a business in this too. So, there was a lot of disturbance. The one thing that they did learn, however, is that as far as the puffin goes, you shouldn't reach into a puffin burrow to look for an egg because puffins had very strong jaws.

Jennifer Stock: That's a good one. That's a good warning. Well, I want to let listeners know that they're listening to Peter White and he is the author of The Farallon Islands: Sentinels of the Golden Gate and we're talking about the human history on the Farallon Islands and we're going to take a short break. You're listening to Ocean Currents on KWMR.

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